

# Fences: to be continued

## Border fence construction at the Serbian-North Macedonian border



June, 2022





## About Klikaktiv:

Klikaktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies is a non- profit civil society organization which provides legal counseling and psychosocial services to people on the move, asylum seekers and refugees in Serbia . The team is present on the external EU borders, namely covering border areas between Serbia and Croatia, Hungary and Romania, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For more information and regular updates on our work, you can visit Klikaktiv's [webpage](#) and [Facebook page](#). For any additional information, comments or suggestions, feel free to contact us: [info@klikaktiv.org](mailto:info@klikaktiv.org).



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## Summary



The construction of the fence on the border between Serbia and North Macedonia continues: between June 2021 and June 2022 a minimum of additional 10–15 km were built. The fence has three layers, one of which is made of barbed wire.



The public in Serbia are generally not knowledgeable about the process of the fence construction. Some of the local communities oppose the fence as it disrupts their daily life and work in the area.



The Decree that predicted the fence construction on the border between Serbia and North Macedonia, also includes referrals to land expropriation on the border between Serbia and Bulgaria, yet no construction work has been observed by the Klikaktiv team, and local community is uninformed about the potential fence in the area.



Klikaktiv strongly condemns this kind of border policy as it is likely to exacerbate risks of trafficking in human beings and other forms of violence and exploitation that people on the move in Serbia face.



*Photo: The fence on the border between Serbia and North Macedonia, June 2022.*

# Introduction

The focus of this report is the ongoing construction of a fence on the border between Serbia and North Macedonia. The report also includes information on refugee activity in the area in general, as well as Frontex presence and activities at the Serbian-Macedonian border. We particularly highlight how the fence and related practices inhibit the human rights of people on the move in Serbia (especially as related to non-refoulement), their safety, and their access to asylum.

The report is encompassed by the project titled “*Monitoring of the Serbian-Macedonian border as the main point of entry for people on the move on the Balkan refugee route*,” which Klikaktiv conducted in partnership with Stiftung Do.

All information provided in the report was obtained by the Klikaktiv team that conducted a field visit to the Serbian-Macedonian border at the end of June 2022, when we visited the construction site at the border and the surrounding villages and towns (more details further in the *The Border Fence* part of the report). Besides the visits to the locations and in person observations, the field work also included interviews with people on the move, local community members and NGO workers. Klikaktiv also reached out to governmental officials in relevant institutions by sending invitations for meetings and applying for access to reception centers, yet received either no response or rejection of access.

The Klikaktiv team first learned about the building of the fence in April 2020 and conducted its first visit to the site in June of the following year. The report produced based on the visit, which also includes more detailed information on the beginning of the construction of the fence and legal framework, is available on Klikaktiv’s website and here: [Border fence on the Serbian Macedonian border, August 2021](#). Building on that report, we now focus on the progression of the fence’s construction across the past year and new changes to migration management in the region.



# The Border Fence (Serbia - North Macedonia)

**Legal framework:** On April 20th, 2020, the Government and the President adopted a *“Decree on the changes of the Decree regarding the measures during the state of emergency,”* which allowed the government to expropriate private land near the border between Serbia and North Macedonia, as well as land near the border between Serbia and Bulgaria. As a reminder, the decision was made while the country was in the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included complete lockdown for locals and refugees. The reason stated in the Decree was *“to prevent the spread of the infectious disease COVID-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and especially the mass unauthorized crossing of the state border outside the border crossing point”*. Following this Decree, the Ministry of Finance adopted the Decision on occupying the land alongside the border, the locations listed in full in the decision. The full text is available [here](#) (in Serbian).

At the time, the decision to build the fence was not very present in the general public discourse. There were a few media news articles (available [here](#)) and to this day the majority of citizens in Serbia are not aware of the fence’s construction. Besides the mentioned state decisions, to the best of our knowledge there are no other publicly available documents which would provide more detail on the fence construction, including its financing.

**Political context:** The European Union Commission spokesperson Ana Pisonero stated on August 20th, 2020 that the fence construction is not part of the migration management agreement between EU and Serbia, and that it is not financed by the EU ([source](#)). Mr Šćiprim Arifi, the then-mayor of Preševo, a town near the border which also hosts a reception center for refugees and migrants, stated to the media that *“we think the fence is meant to additionally secure the borders of non-EU states from refugees, who might again go through the so-called Balkan route in mass numbers”* ([source](#)). As a reminder, the then-prime minister and current president of Serbia Mr Aleksandar Vučić stated in February 2016 that Serbia will not build fences as *“that is not civilized nor in accordance with European values”* ([source](#)).

Since the EU – Turkey deal in 2016, “the Balkan Route” has been portrayed as “closed” by EU politicians and media alike, yet this is far from reality. The data points out that thousands travel through the route each year, while Europe turns a blind eye. This has been exacerbated after the Taliban takeover of government in Afghanistan in August 2021, with a rise of newly arrived people from the country; and the invasion of Russia in Ukraine in February 2022, when global attention and resources have additionally pushed the Balkan route under the radar. On the route, Serbia has been one of the key transit countries due to its geographical position, with additional strategic importance given that in the north it borders Croatia, Hungary and Romania, whose migration management policies have been shaped to “protect EU external borders”. Official data provided by the SCRM<sup>1</sup> states that at the moment there are approximately 4,500 refugees in migrants in the official centers. In 2021, SCRM accommodated more than 60,000 people on the move, while in the first five months of 2022 [Frontex](#) recorded 82% more entries into the EU through the Balkan route compared to the same period in 2021. In 2022, the majority of people on the move tend to arrive in Serbia through North Macedonia.

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<sup>1</sup> Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the governmental agency mandated for management of all official accommodation capacities in Serbia, more information available [here](#).



## Location and Description of the Fence: the progress made 2021 - 2022

The border fence alongside the border between Serbia and North Macedonia is located on the east side of the highway in the direction from Skoplje (capital of North Macedonia) to Belgrade (capital of Serbia). On the west of the highway is a village Miratovac and Miratovačno polje (a field between the village and the border) where the fence is also to be constructed.

The fence consists of two 3-4 meters high “walls” made of wire. It is expected that there will be an additional one meter of razor wire part on top of the “walls”, according to the local community members Klikaktiv has interviewed. An additional third wall made entirely of razor wire is also expected to be built before the first regular wire wall from the side of North Macedonia to Serbia. This means that for people on the move coming from North Macedonia to Serbia there will be three layers of the fence: the first made entirely of razor wire, the second made of regular wire with the razor wire on top, the space in between where the border police cars patrol, and the third wall identical to the second in construction. The walls are 25 meters apart, which presumably allows for several border patrol cars to pass between the walls at the same time. The fence as it was in June 2022 can be seen in the photos provided below, taken by the Klikaktiv team on the site.



The construction of the fence has progressed: a conservative estimation would be that an additional 10 to 15 km had been built in the year time period. In June 2021 the fence was built from the border crossing “Preševo ” until the village Char, while in June 2022 it was also built further on near the villages of Strezovac and Slavujevac. This is the most accessible part of the terrain in the border area as east from the village Slavujevac is a mountainous region.. Examples include the fence being built on the hillside above the ethnic Albanian village [Ašane](#), as well as the Serbian ethnic village [Slavujevac](#).









*Photo: A view of the fence near the village of Miratovac: on the hillside on the far left is the fence, while in the valley on the far right is the official border crossing.*



*Photo: A view of the fence from the nearby village of Miratovac.*



Here is [a map](#) of the planned fence published in the regional media in August 2020 and [a map](#) based on Klikaktiv's field observations in June 2022. At the moment of Klikaktiv's visit at the end of June 2022, the fence had been erected up to this point as shown on this [map](#). The fence is also expected to be built over the field between Lojane (the last village in North Macedonia before the border) and Miratovac (the first village in Serbia one encounters upon crossing the border). During KlikAktiv's visit in the region, the terrain between these two villages was being prepared for the construction.



The Klikaktiv team noted no police presence in the area of the fence, either Serbian or foreign. The local community members that Klikaktiv interviewed stated they had not noted the presence of refugees and migrants in the area either. Given the fence's construction, refugees had allegedly shifted their route to a new entry on the other side of the field in Miratovac village, more on the side of villages in Kosovo. This trend is likely to continue as the construction progresses and the fence on the border closes.

Generally, the local community in the villages where the fence is being erected seem to be opposed to the construction as it disrupts their daily agricultural activities. Crop fields have been cut through by construction, leaving some of the fields cut in two parts: one on the Serbian side and the other on the Macedonian side. We also met some local community members of other villages in the area who were not opposed to the fence or did not mind it. Some of the locals that Klikaktiv interviewed stated some of their land had already been expropriated by the government of Serbia and that they had received an official legal notice of it, but had not yet received any financial compensation by the time of the interview.

**Fence on the border with Bulgaria?** The Klikaktiv team went to both the border with Bulgaria and to the border with North Macedonia to further investigate the process of the fence's construction. Even though the Decree states the land around the border with Bulgaria is to be expropriated for the same purposes, we found no indicators that the construction of the fence on the border with Bulgaria had started by the time of our field visit (end of March 2022). The local community members we interviewed at the time also had no information about such a project.



## Other relevant information in the border region

Klikaktiv also monitored the situation in the area near the fence, and visited the village of Miratovac, town of Preševo, and the cities of Vranje and Niš.

**Refugee activity in the border area between Serbia and North Macedonia:** For several years, the village of [Lojane](#) in North Macedonia was the starting point of people on the move who traveled to Serbia from North Macedonia. In 2021, there was a police breakdown of the smuggling criminal groups operating in the village, some of whom were suspected to have committed the crime of trafficking in human beings<sup>2</sup>. After the arrests, Lojane ceased to be a refugee hotspot and it is believed that the starting point has been moved further into the territory of North Macedonia (like the town of [Kumanovo](#)).

The first village that people on the move encounter after entering Serbia from North Macedonia is [Miratovac](#). The village was an important hotspot before March 2016, when the Balkan route was officially “closed”, as hundreds of refugees passed through the village and used the local transit camp and later a local mosque as places to rest and recuperate.



In 2022, however, local informants stated that refugees and migrants in the village are not present and not visible in the public space. They attributed the fact not to presumably low numbers of new arrivals, but to differences in the organization of smuggling networks. There are taxis waiting for the new arrivals to take them further. The organization is such that the taxis are not present for more than 10–15 minutes, so that they are not too visible to locals and police alike. The taxi drivers are not from the area as most of the locals do not recognize them. The local informants also stated that refugees now mostly arrive in Serbia over the Miratovac hillside facing Kosovo. They stated they had seen newly arrived people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, including women and children, but in fewer in numbers compared to previous years. Local informants stated they are aware that the Serbian police sometimes pushes back refugees to North Macedonia, but had not witnessed such an incident themselves.

The border fence is expected to be built over the field between Lojane and Miratovac, with a smaller border crossing for locals<sup>3</sup>, which is at the moment barricaded as shown in the photo below with constant police presence.



*Top photo: The mosque and its minaret in the village of Miratovac which at the beginning of refugee crises served as a guideline for refugees entering Serbia from North Macedonia via the nearby field.*

*Bottom photo: A local border crossing between the villages Lojane (North Macedonia) and Miratovac (Serbia) barricaded at the moment with constant police presence.*

<sup>2</sup> The news article of the police operation and the arrest is available [here](#) (in Serbian).

<sup>3</sup> The agreement between the two countries on the local crossing has been reported in the local media at the end of 2019, available [here](#) (in Serbian).

**Official accommodation centers in the region:** The Klikaktiv team visited the reception center in Preševo and the asylum center in Vranje. Klikaktiv submitted a request to enter the two facilities to the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM), who is in charge of the camp management, yet both requests were dismissed on the grounds of “that there is enough free legal and psycho-social support in the center in Vranje” and “that there is no need for such services as people on the move stay only briefly in the center in Preševo”, as stated in the SCRM’s response. The following data are observations from outside the camps and from interviews with locals and refugees themselves.

In [Preševo](#), a town near the border with North Macedonia and the Serbian village of Miratovac, there is a reception center for refugees and migrants, the largest in capacity in Serbia. People on the move usually stay there briefly as they rush north to continue their journey. This center is also used to accommodate people on the move who were forcibly relocated from squats in the north of Serbia, during the police raids which have been regular for a few years now. According to refugees’ testimonies, the camp is not closed but the police patrols the local bus and train station, not allowing them to board the vehicles that are headed to the north of the country. They stated their only remaining option is local taxis who charge 200–300 euros per person to drive them up north.



*Photo: Entrance to the reception center in Preševo.*

The Klikaktiv team witnessed a police car and a police officer in front of the center and a police officer in the nearby train station. Refugees in front of the center came from various countries of origin, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and the Maghreb countries. The majority of them were single men, yet there were also unaccompanied boys present (including younger ones between 11 and 14 years of age). There was a notable increase in the number of refugees around the camp, number of taxis parked in front of the center, and new profit-based local services targeted at refugees (halal fast food shops, exchange offices, barber shops etc) compared to the previous Klikaktiv visit in June 2021. Refugees were openly negotiating with taxi drivers in front of the camp.

At the moment of Klikaktiv’s visit in June 2022, there were between 800 and 1000 refugees accommodated in the center, the majority of whom were single men. Local informants stated that there are occasionally families in the center as well, most of whom are newly arrived. These families are usually Syrian refugees who had been in Turkey for years and had set off to continue their journey fearing deportation to Syria by the Turkish authorities.

Klikaktiv submitted a request to enter the center to the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM), who is in charge of the camp management, yet the request was dismissed on the grounds of “that there is no need for such services as people on the move stay only briefly in the center in Preševo”, as stated in the SCRM’s response. Klikaktiv also sent a request for a meeting with the local municipality of Preševo but but request was never answered.



*Photo: Asylum center in Vranje, currently hosting refugees from Ukraine.*



[Vranje](#) is a larger city in the region with a newly renovated asylum center at its outskirts. The asylum center is at the moment designated as an accommodation facility for refugees fleeing war in Ukraine. In June 2022, there were approximately 70 persons in the center (including around 20 children), mostly from Ukraine and a few from Russia. Before the renovation the center hosted refugee families from the Middle East who were transferred to a smaller and remote reception center near the town of [Bosilegrad](#). When the Klikaktiv visited the place in June 2022, the camp and its surrounding seemed more polished compared to the previous years. There were notably fewer people around the camp compared to the number of refugees outside the center in Preševo. Klikaktiv also requested permission from SCRM to enter the asylum center in Vranje, which was also dismissed like the previous request for Preševo, yet this time on the grounds “that there is enough free legal and psycho-social support in the center in Vranje”.

**Frontex and foreign police officers in the region:** [Frontex](#) (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) [started an operation in Serbia](#) in June, 2021. With the mission to support the “guarding of EU Member states’ borders”, Frontex’s presence is officially announced to be on the border between Bulgaria and Serbia. Yet, the agency’s social media posts<sup>4</sup> indicate that Frontex officers might be operating on the border between Serbia and North Macedonia, both non-EU member states.

During its field visit to the region in June 2022, the Klikaktiv team did not identify any Frontex officers or vehicles in the region. Yet, local informants stated they had seen foreign police officers from **Hungary, Austria, Slovakia or the Czech Republic** (they were unsure) in the town of Preševo. Media in Austria also reported on the country’s police presence in Serbia<sup>5</sup>.

Klikaktiv was also told that a regional military base exists in a nearby village, where police officers from **North Macedonia** can also allegedly be seen. The team visited the village and observed the base from the outside, but did not meet any officers at that time.

Local informants also stated that in May 2022, they had seen Frontex officers in front of the reception center for refugees in Preševo, who were standing and not allowing people accommodated in the center to leave it without written permission from SCRM. As a reminder, this is by no means the mandate of Frontex. All reception and asylum centers are managed by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration which ought to respond directly to the government of Serbia.

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4 An example of one of the posts is available [here](#).

5 Some of the media reports about Austrian police officers in Serbia can be read [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

## Going forward: Conclusion and Recommendations

Klikaktiv strongly condemns the decision of the government of Serbia to build the fence on its southern border and calls for the cease of the construction.

Practice around the world shows that such fortification policies are not effective in stopping migration flows. The construction of the fence is likely to further force people on the move to depend on smuggling criminal groups for their journey and hence exacerbate risks that people on the move in the country face, especially risks of trafficking in human beings. The fence and the political narrative that supports its construction further harm the safety and wellbeing of refugees.

Secondly, the construction of the fence has already endangered daily life and practice of the local community, and this is likely to be made even more difficult once the fence is completed.

Thirdly, we call on the government to provide the public with information on the costs of the construction and compensation for expropriated land. We also advocate for the funds to be relocated to social protection programs for the most vulnerable people on the move in Serbia.

Lastly, we hope this report will be one of the steps to opening an open dialogue in the society about what the decision to build a fence on one of its borders means for Serbia, its respect of human rights and its process of EU integration.



### *Editorial Notes:*

*This report is made as a summary of the field visit to the region of Serbian-Macedonian border in June 2022.*

*All pictures in this report were made by KlikAktiv and the copyrights are with KlikAktiv. Belgrade, August 2022.*